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**Little by Little, Piece by Piece** by Marilyn Helmer

Once there was a farmer who had three sons. Every year after they harvested their crops and stored their winter supply, the farmer sold what was left and divided the money equally among himself and his sons.

As he gave each boy his share, the father always said, “Remember, my sons: little by little, piece by piece.”

Oldest Brother and Middle Brother paid no attention to their father’s words. They cared only for the luxuries that their share of the money would buy.

Youngest Brother, however, listened to his father. He saw how each year his father used his share to buy more land. And he noticed that each year there was more money to be divided among them all.

Time passed, and the father grew old and died. He left the land to be divided equally among his three sons.

“I will sell my share,” said Oldest Brother. “I’m going to the Great City to seek my fortune.”

“I will sell my share, too, and come with you,” said Middle Brother.

“Wait,” Youngest Brother pleaded. “Our wealth is here in the land. If we work together and buy more land, little by little, piece by piece, our fortune will grow.”

“You sound like our father,” sneered Oldest Brother. “I’m tired of making my fortune little by little.”

“Piece by piece is not for me,” Middle Brother agreed. “I want my fortune right now.”

So Oldest Brother and Middle Brother sold their shares, leaving Youngest Brother with only one small piece of land. They headed for the Great City, promising to return for a visit at the end of the year.

Youngest Brother worked the land as he always had. “Little by little, piece by piece,” he would say with satisfaction as he watched the seedlings push their way up through the rich soil. When the crops were harvested, Youngest Brother used the extra money from the sale of his crops to buy back some of the land his brothers had sold.

Meanwhile the two oldest brothers had reached the Great City. There they found all the luxuries they had dreamed of.

Little by little was not for Oldest Brother or Middle Brother. They spent their money quickly and freely. Piece by piece, it tumbled through their fingers like pebbles in a landslide.

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At the end of the year, the brothers dressed in their finest clothes and went to visit Youngest Brother. They came on horseback, laden with gifts, and told Youngest Brother tale after tale of their wonderful life in the Great City.

“Now tell us your news,” said Oldest Brother when he paused to catch his breath.

“Yes,” said Middle Brother. “What interesting things have you been doing?”

“I had a good harvest this year,” said Youngest Brother. “I even managed to buy back some of the land you sold.”

Oldest Brother and Middle Brother exchanged smiles. At the end of the visit, they hurried back to their fine life in the Great City.

Another year passed, Oldest Brother and Middle Brother again came to visit Younger Brother. This time they arrived on foot and brought only a few simple gifts.

“Little by little, life in the Great City is becoming more expensive,” Oldest Brother explained.

“Piece by piece, our things are wearing out,” said Middle Brother.

The older brothers noticed that Youngest Brother had even more land than he’d had the year before. They were surprised to see that he had built a new wing onto the house and hired two farm hands and a cook. Youngest Brother prepared a feast in their honor.

“This is a fine feast indeed,” said Middle Brother.

“Finer than the year before,” said Oldest Brother.

“I had a good year,” Youngest Brother replied again.

When they came back for their visit the third year, the older brothers arrived with only the clothes on their backs.

“Little by little, life in the Great City is becoming ever more expensive,” said Middle Brother.

“Piece by piece, we have had to sell our jewels, baubles, and trinkets just to live,” said Oldest Brother. They noticed that Youngest Brother’s farm was now almost as large as it had been when their father was alive. The table groaned under the feast he had prepared for them.

“You seem to prosper,” said Middle Brother.

“I have had a good year,” Youngest Brother replied modestly.

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The next year Youngest Brother waited and watched for his brothers, but they did not come. Finally Youngest Brother set out for the Great City to look for them. He found them living in a shack at the edge of the city.

Oldest Brother looked away in shame. “We could not afford to make a trip home this year,” he said. “Little by little, our fortune has disappeared.”

“Piece by piece, we have lost everything,” Middle brother added.

“Come back to the farm with me,” said Youngest Brother.

So Oldest Brother and Middle Brother returned to the farm where they had grown up. Youngest Brother hired them to work for him.

At the end of the year, Middle Brother and Oldest Brother used their wages to buy shares in the farm. From then on, each year as their father before them had done, the three brothers bought more land. Little by little, their farm grew until it stretched as far as the eye could see. And piece by piece, the fortune of the three brothers grew with it.

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